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SUBJECT: MEETING WITH FNL CHIEF RWASA

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES CHARLES H. TWINING FOR
REASON 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Introduction and Summary. As part of a series of calls on political party chiefs, we met August 28 with Agathon Rwaswa, the head of the last rebel group to become part of the peace process and demobilize, the Forces Nationales de Liberation, or FNL. Protected by South African troops, he proved during our ninety minute session together at his party headquarters to be a fascinating interlocutor. He described the atmosphere of injustice in which he grew up, the development of his thinking when he was in the forest, the problems and harassment his party is facing, his appeal to Burundians regardless of ethnicity, and the bleak futures of the demobilized soldiers. President Rwaswa is convinced the ruling CNDD-FNL is seeking to eliminate the FNL. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Background. Rwaswa, a Hutu from northern Burundi, described his youth as a time when one had to write down his ethnic affiliation in primary school, something which followed him and marked him as he grew older. Tutsis were admitted into secondary school in far greater numbers than Hutus, and it did not take long before he discovered that good government jobs and admission into major university faculties went primarily to Tutsis. This, along with the massacres of Hutus that occurred at regular intervals in this country's independent history and the fact that all of Burundi's strongmen were Tutsis, developed in him a sense of injustice that pushed him into a Hutu political movement (Palipehutu) in the 1980's. It soon became obvious that political action alone would change nothing, at which point the military arm, or FNL, was created in 1990.

¶3. (C) Years in the Wilderness. President Rwaswa said his many years in the forest were learning experiences. He made good decisions and bad ones, he said. He also had a lot of time to think. Injustice, inequality, the police state that Burundi had been almost since independence, politicians who thought only of themselves, all helped crystallize in his mind what was needed to turn the country around. He cited basic agricultural development that helps small farmers improve their production until they can move forward on their own steam. He spoke of the need not just to cater to a selfish political class far removed from the great mass of Burundians. He mentioned the gap between the rural majority and the urban few. He referred to the necessity for equal treatment of all. We suggested he had the makings of a political platform for the Presidential race, and he agreed.

¶4. (C) A Political Party. With its signing of an agreement with the GOB last December 4, he observed that it began the process of coming in from the cold. The movement dropped the Palipehutu part of its title and, after Rwaswa led the demobilization effort the following April 18, became a political party. He did not give any reasons for the change from a rebel movement to one entering the mainstream. He

said the party has terrific problems: no money, no building of its own, harassment of its members and efforts to have meetings. Nevertheless, it intends to continue the political struggle and present candidates at all levels in the 2010 elections. Needless to say, it is also looking for help. The President knows his South African guards will soon be withdrawn and referred to the agreement whereby 390 personnel from his side and 390 personnel from the Burundian military would receive training together to constitute a future guard force for FNL leaders. The GOB has not moved on this issue, and Rwsa seemed pessimistic that it would.

15. (C) Relations with the Ruling Party. The FNL President was especially bitter toward the ruling CNDD-FDD. We mentioned that we thought their relations were sometimes fairly good during their years together in the forest and noted speculation that they could join politically even today. Rwsa denied both. He said the story of cooperation among rebel groups was one the ruling party put out, but it was never the case. The CNDD-FNL was determined to eliminate the FNL when it was in the woods, and it is trying to eliminate it today. Rwsa said the CNDD-FDD has been using money and perks to buy over FNL leaders, proof of which is seen in the move into the intelligence service of former spokesman Pasteur Habimana and former Deputy Chief of Staff Juxbert Ibrahim Musavyi. President Rwsa was particularly bitter toward Habimana. Rwsa discovered while they were still in the forest that Habimana had been siphoning off movement funds into his pocket. Rwsa tried to settle the affair quietly, then later had to take it to a larger meeting of the leadership. He said it never stopped, and the CNDD-FNL found Habimana's weakness and was able to bring him onto its side. The list of incidents caused by either CNDD-FDD members or local officials that the central government makes no effort to reign in demonstrates just how hard authorities are trying to quash the FNL, the President said.

16. (C) FNL Identity. While the message is good about what to do about Burundi, we said we did not see how the party would overcome its identity as a purely Hutu party if it wished to win elections. Rwsa initially dismissed the accusation, noting that every party has an ethnic identity to one degree or another. We persisted in the accusation about the FNL, and he said that was a thing of the past. The FNL appeals to all ethnic groups today, President Rwsa insisted, and is getting Tutsi members, he asserted. He said that when he goes out into the countryside he speaks about the need for equality for all citizens, and the reaction is positive.

17. (C) Demobilized Soldiers. The President observed that, other than those integrated into the armed forces and the police, as well as the government, the rest have been let go with the equivalent of \$80 in their pockets, a sum that does not last long. His proposal for government vocational training programs has not elicited any response. The World Bank-directed program has been of too limited duration. We expressed interest in discussing further a possible program which we might help support.

18. (C) Comment. Agathon Rwsa comes across as someone who is seeking to be heard, and having trouble doing so. It is true the government and ruling party are giving his efforts a hard time. One often hears that the FNL has more popularity in the countryside than is generally recognized, and a credible election would confirm or give the lie to such talk. He is the country's Social Security Commissioner and is clearly engaged in the process of making it work, willing to discuss at length the problems Burundi's social security system faces. His desire to broaden its coverage from ten to one hundred percent of the population very much fits in with the social and economic agenda in which he believes personally, and passionately. At the same time it is important to remember that there is considerable agreement that this articulate leader also has lots of blood on his hands, and the extent to which he can overcome this legacy is uncertain, at best. It is also likely that during his years in the forest Rwsa thought so much about the supposed injustices

committed against him and his people that he came to believe all the stories, whether true or not. Note that on the same day as our meeting, the FNL announced the dismissal of Habimana from the party, both for his close relations with the CNDD-FDD and the fraud he committed while in the FNL.

Twining